

Date: November 8, 2011
To: Shane DeForest, Field Manager, Pinedale Field Office
From: Pinedale Anticline Working Group
Subject: Advice and Recommendations Regarding Habitat Improvement Project Development in Response to Triggering of the Wildlife Monitoring and Mitigation Matrix for Mule Deer

The PAWG has been asked to provide advice and recommendations regarding habitat improvement efforts to be conducted in the Pinedale Field Office in Response to the 2010 triggering of the Wildlife Monitoring and Mitigation Matrix for mule deer. The PAWG members attended a field tour of various methods for treatment which have been conducted within the Pinedale Field Office and heard from staff wildlife biologists for BLM and the Wyoming Game and Fish Department about habitat requirements. We held additional discussions on August 3, 2011 regarding habitat improvement techniques, mule deer habitat requirements and the requirements of other species. Based on these discussions, the PAWG offers the following advice and recommendations:

BLM specialists in consultation with WGF specialists are the ones who should make specific determinations regarding treatment specifics. The PAWG will recommend the overall framework within which the decisions should be made.

The goal of treatments should be to increase mule deer on the crucial winter range on the Mesa.

Where to conduct treatments:

Treatments should be conducted in both the transitional ranges used by Mesa deer (on-site and off-site) as well as the crucial winter range areas used by mule deer on the Mesa (on-site).

On-site treatments should be focused in areas where development has not occurred and where development is not scheduled in the immediate future first, including the flanks. Areas where development has occurred and development activity has moved on should be considered secondary.

For treatments, we recommend the BLM, within these areas, avoid vegetation disturbance on south slopes or other dry areas where cheat-grass or other invasive species occur or would have a higher chance of increasing. In addition, treatments which come down to the edge of roads or other traffic areas should be avoided because of cheat-grass and other weed concerns by setting the disturbance back.

The choice of which sagebrush community to focus efforts in is important and surface disturbance will be limited due to sage grouse core area restrictions. Therefore, the PAWG recommends that the BLM focus on areas where the habitat components are all present but would expect to respond well with treatment to create more productive palatable and nutritious vegetation for mule deer.

What treatments to conduct:

The method of treatment is not as important as the outcome. Timing of expected benefit should be paramount to the selection of the method (short term versus long term benefits). We recommend that treatments which will produce more rapid results be given higher priority. Treatments which will have longer term results are also important and should be implemented as well. We recommend emphasizing short term treatments but also that longer term treatments receive significant attention.

The PAWG encourages the BLM to maintain and/or enhance its existing treatments and any future treatments. Don't just do them and move on. The initial investment should not be allowed to dissolve. For example, after the initial treatment, things like snow fence, fertilization, watering, seeding, or retreatment, could increase the benefits of the original work. This list is not meant to be all inclusive; rather it is a suggestion of the array of options we recommend you consider.

When to conduct treatments:

Bearing in mind our recommendations above regarding long term and short term project treatments, we would expect BLM to follow best management practices with specific methods of treatment which would optimize results within the targeted timeframes.

How the treatments should be conducted:

Mosaic patterns seem to produce the greatest gains with the lowest impacts to the existing habitat. Treatment of larger continuous blocks reduces the value of the habitat to mule deer and other species and could extend the recovery time.

Other recommendations involving development of habitat improvement mitigation treatments include:

All treatments proposed should include a robust pre and post treatment monitoring program to verify and record the results of the effort and investment and to determine where changes in methods might be needed.

To achieve a longer term benefit, we recommend treatments be designed to accomplish a diverse age class of desired vegetation. This could be achieved with smaller treatment blocks scattered over the landscape and implemented over multiple years.